

British Artists

JOHN PETTIE

SIXTEEN EXAMPLES IN COLOUR
OF THE ARTIST'S WORK



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BRITISH
ARTISTS

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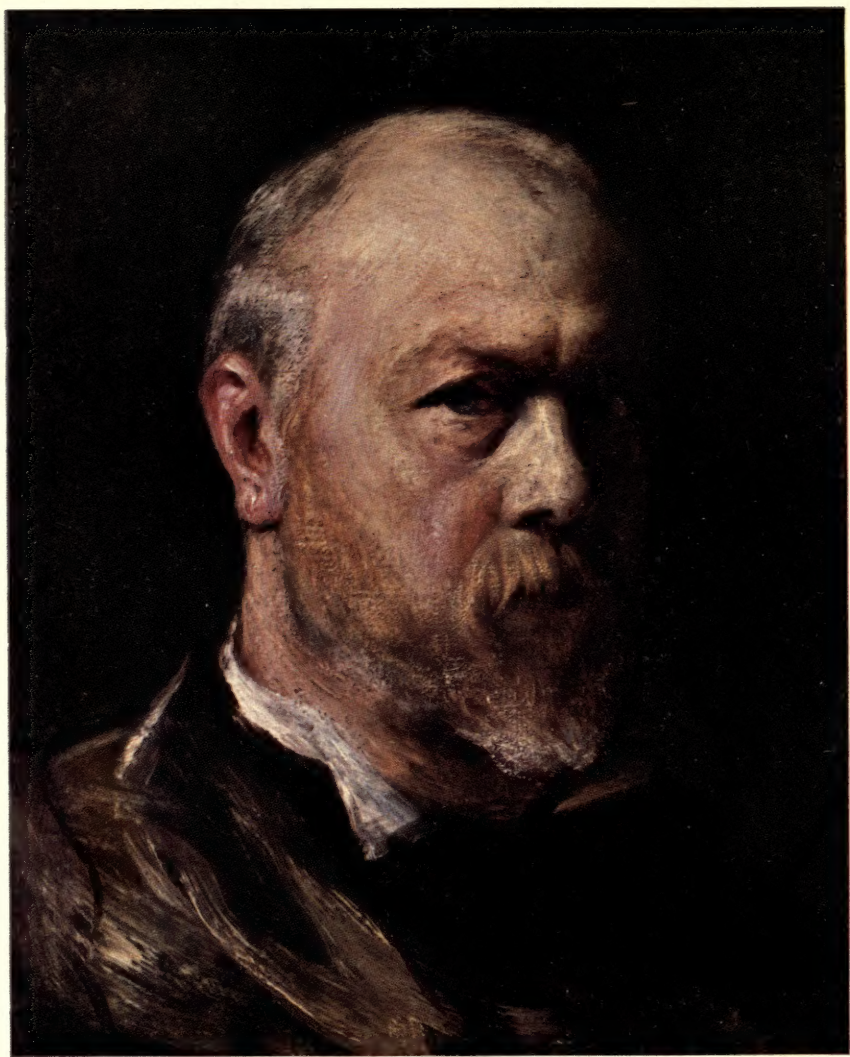
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Pettie, John
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JOHN PETTIE

R.A., H.R.S.A.

SIXTEEN EXAMPLES IN COLOUR
OF THE ARTIST'S WORK

WITH
AN INTRODUCTION
BY
MARTIN HARDIE, B.A., A.R.E.



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JOHN PETTIE, R.A.

LIKE many great painters, John Pettie was of humble origin. Born in Edinburgh in 1839, he was the son of a tradesman who, having reached some prosperity, purchased a business in the village of East Linton and moved there with his family in 1852. The boy was born with art in his blood, and Nature never intended him for the dull and respectable vocation to which his father was anxious that he should succeed. More than once, when despatched on an errand to storeroom or cellar, he was discovered making drawings on the lid of a wooden box or the top of a cask, totally oblivious of his journey and its object. A portrait of the village carrier and his donkey, done when he was a boy of fifteen, struck neighbouring critics as being almost "uncanny," and overcame even his father's objections to art as a possible career.

Greatly daring, his mother carried off her son to Edinburgh, a bundle of drawings beneath his arm, to visit Mr. James Drummond, one of the leading members of the Royal Scottish Academy. "Much better make him stick to business," was

his verdict, after listening to the mother's story. But his tone changed when he had seen the drawings. Not a word was uttered while he turned them over ; but then, handing them back, he said : " Well, madam, you can put that boy to what you like, but he'll die an artist ! "

With every encouragement Pettie now entered the ' Trustees ' Academy, where he became a student under Robert Scott Lauder, R.S.A. Among Pettie's fellow-students were George Paul Chalmers, W. Q. Orchardson, J. MacWhirter, Hugh Cameron, Peter Graham, Tom Graham, and W. McTaggart. They were destined to form a School which breathed new life into Scottish art and inaugurated a fresh epoch. All of them gave free expression to their own personality, but one and all made beautiful colour their highest ideal.

In 1858 Pettie exhibited his first picture at the Royal Scottish Academy ; and in 1860 made his first venture at the Royal Academy in London with " The Armourers," which was hung on the line. It was followed in 1861 by " What d' ye lack, madam ? " a picture of the saucy 'prentice in Scott's " Fortunes of Nigel." With the exhibition of this picture his success was assured, and the encouragement he received led him to leave the North and seek his future in the greater world of London.

In 1862 we find Pettie sharing a studio in Pimlico with Orchardson and Tom Graham. A year later, taking C. E. Johnson in their company, they moved to 37, Fitzroy Square, a house afterwards tenanted by Ford Madox Brown. I have before me a solemn agreement dated September 18, 1863: "We, W. Q. Orchardson, J. Pettie, and T. Graham, agree to each other that we shall pay the following proportions of rent for house, No. 37, Fitzroy Square (W. Q. Orchardson, £66 13s.; John Pettie, £56 13s.; T. Graham, £41 13s.), or in these proportions whether of increase or reduction." Here they lived a happy Bohemian existence, with guinea-pigs running about the studio floor; their cash-box an open drawer where bank-notes, gold and silver were mixed in cheerful confusion with bottles of varnish and tubes of colour; their general factotum one Joe Wall, a retired prize-fighter, who had been model to Landseer and Frith.

To the two years spent in Fitzroy Square, and to the ten years following, belong several of Pettie's finest works. His keen perception of dramatic incident, his fine sense of colour, and his brilliance of craftsmanship, soon drew the attention they deserved. In 1865 his "Drum-head Court-Martial" was one of the pictures before which visitors clustered daily when it hung on the Academy walls. It is a dashing

picture, full of spirit in idea and design; and the artist seldom painted anything better, or more full of character, than the heads of those commanders sitting in judgment.

In the following year, at the early age of twenty-seven, he was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy, winning the coveted honour eighteen months before his friend and companion, Orchardson. With "Treason," exhibited in 1867, he burst into a triumph of dramatic intensity and glowing colour. The picture has a grip and unity of conception that places it on a higher level than any of his previous works. To the three following years belong such fine subjects as "The Sally" and "The Flag of Truce," which, with "Treason," are now in the Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield; the "Tussle with a Highland Smuggler"; and "Touchstone and Audrey." "Rejected Addresses," exhibited in 1870, has all Pettie's charm of colour and fluent brushwork.

Among other comedies in little, touched with light fancy and the joy of life, are "A Storm in a Teacup" and "Two Strings to Her Bow." The latter is one of Pettie's happiest pieces of pure sentiment, persuasive in its natural charm and its touch of romance. Light-hearted gaiety and the ecstasy of existence sing in rippling music from lines and colours vibrant with joy.

In 1874 Pettie was elected a Royal Academician, filling the vacancy caused by the death of Sir Edwin Landseer. His first exhibits were two of his finest works, "A State Secret," and "Ho! Ho! Old Noll!" The scene in the latter is a tennis-court where two cavaliers are looking on with a chuckle of amusement at the spirited caricature which a third has made upon the wall. "Ho! Ho! Old Noll" is the work of a master draughtsman. The light pose and easy grace of the cavalier who makes the sketch, the foreshortening of his arm, the hand that holds the chalk—so lightly that it seems to move—are all superbly rendered. Two years later, in 1876, he exhibited "The Step," a picture of a little girl with golden hair, in a pale blue dress, dancing before her grandmother. The same old lady, with spinning-wheel and high-backed chair, formed the subject of a picture titled "Grandmother's Memories."

"A Sword-and-Dagger Fight," exhibited in the following year, is one of many pictures that show Pettie's dramatic perception and his power of representing physical exertion and momentary movement. Almost at the same time was painted "Disbanded," a rough and ragged but stalwart Highlander, without doubt a rebel of "the '45" on his return from Culloden. This is one of many subjects for which the artist sought

inspiration in the novels of Sir Walter Scott. "The Clash of Steel," painted in 1888, obviously owes its origin to the first chapter of "The Fortunes of Nigel." It depicts the time when the cry of "Clubs! Clubs! 'Prentices!" often echoed along a London street.

"The Chieftain's Candlesticks," of 1886, will puzzle those who do not recall the scene in Scott's "Legend of Montrose." Angus M'Aulay, a proud Highlander, on a visit to his friend, Sir Miles Musgrave, in England, had six candlesticks of solid silver set before him on the table at dinner—

"Sae they began to jeer the laird, that he saw nae sic graith in his ain poor country; and the laird, scorning to hae his country put down without a word for its credit, swore, like a gude Scotsman, that he had mair candlesticks, and better candlesticks, in his ain castle at hame, than were ever lighted in a hall in Cumberland."

When the laird welcomed the Englishman on an unexpected visit shortly after, his purse and credit were both at stake, for he had nothing of more value than some tin sconces. But M'Aulay was helped out of the dilemma, to his own surprise, by his retainer, Donald:

"Gentlemans, her dinner is ready, *and her candles are lighted, too,*" said Donald.

"The two English strangers, therefore, were ushered into the hall, where an unexpected display

awaited them. Behind every seat stood a gigantic Highlander, holding in his right hand his drawn sword, and in the left a blazing torch. . . . 'Lost, lost,' said Musgrave gaily—'my own silver candlesticks are all melted and riding on horseback by this time, and I wish the fellows that enlisted were half as trusty as these.'"

Another Scott scene, chosen from "Waverley," was painted in 1892, and shows "Bonnie Prince Charlie" at the moment when the young chevalier is entering the ballroom at Holyrood, with flowers strewn at his feet. This, one of the last of Pettie's works, is one of the most brilliant and energetic in its colour scheme.

The last years of Pettie's life were lean years for the painter of genre. The period preceding 1890 marked the climax of the prejudice against the "literary idea" in paint. It was a prejudice somewhat unjust, for there is nothing to prevent the subject-picture from being true art, any more than the subject-poem from being poetry. At the same time there was a natural reaction after the banalities of the mid-Victorian painters of genre on the one hand, and the over-wrought preciousness of the pre-Raphaelites on the other.

Pettie had often painted portraits for his own pleasure, and in these lean years they became to some extent a necessity. His portrait work is naturally not so well known as his subject-

painting, yet now and then he produced things that in sheer power and interest of colour and technique rank among his highest achievements. One of them is his own portrait, now in the Tate Gallery, which is masterly in its brushwork, with a Rubens-like quality in its rich impasto of brilliant colour, its fine amber tones, and its translucent carnations. Another of his finest portraits is that of Sir Charles Wyndham, in his character of David Garrick at the moment of recognizing Ada—"If I had but known." It is not only a brilliant portrait, but a magnificent piece of characterization, summing up and seizing all the intensity of the actor's emotion at the most dramatic moment of the play. It required a great actor so to express, almost in silence, by the look of a moment, that world of sorrow and regret. It was a great painter who could catch and throw upon his canvas the poignant emotion of an "instant made eternity."

The greatness of Pettie's art owes much to his strong personality. His art was the immediate response to his own vigorous nature, and rarely has an artist's temperament been more absolutely reflected in subject as well as style. A painting of action was to Pettie, vigorous and robust, as natural a fulfilment of his own spirit as was an exquisite dreamy nocturne to Whistler, the fragile man of nerves and sentiment. Nature

and inclination led Pettie to the dramatic motive, the treatment of anecdote, the representation of the "brute incident." He loved romance; he delighted in costly stuffs, in frills and ruffles, silks and satins, the glitter of a sword, the sheen of military accoutrements. His work shows the possession of that quality which the formal critics of literature call vision. He actually saw the things that he painted, as they really were, in their own atmosphere, whether of the seventeenth century or of fifty years ago, whether they were things of State, plots and deep-laid treachery, or things of romance—the tragedies and humours of life, whether in palace, camp, or country lane. His pictures are quick and alive—*une tranche de la vie*. It is no mean art that can give on one canvas the whole spirit and circumstance of a period in history.

Though Pettie's subjects make a universal appeal, his claim to greatness must rest on something higher than this. The great picture depends for its greatness not on its subject, but on a combination of inherent qualities of line, form, colour, and chiaroscuro. The greatest of these, the very language of the painter, is colour; and in colour Pettie excelled. As a young student in Edinburgh he used to visit George Paul Chalmers at his lodgings, and stay talking with him till he had to remain all night. So they would

retire to bed, still talking, till they fell asleep ; and, says Chalmers' biographer, "their talk was all of colour." Whether in shadow or light, Pettie's colour has, in a high degree, those qualities of resonance and vibration which distinguish the masters of this essential of the painter's craft. He loved colour not only for its full brilliance, its magnificent contrasts, its satisfying opulence, but also for its suave delicacy, its possibilities of subtle orchestration. It is as a great colourist that he will live.

In a brief note like this, intended mainly as an introduction to an admirable series of reproductions of Pettie's work, it is impossible to picture the man, or to analyze adequately his work and his methods. I should like, however, to add here two extracts from unpublished letters by him, which have recently come into my hands and throw some light on the man and his attitude towards his work. To a question about the number of versions of his picture "The Laird," he writes as follows :

"In April, 1878, I sold to Mr. E. F. White, the dealer, *three* canvases, one a blot of colour, my first idea, a few inches long. The second was a finished sketch, which was carried on at the same time as the picture ; and the third, the picture now in Manchester. It was my habit at that time (and is so still, to some extent) to design my subject-pictures first by a blot of colour, then by a large study, generally

half the size of the picture. On this I try any alterations or variety of effect during the progress of the larger picture, sometimes finishing as highly as the principal one."

The second letter, of March 11, 1873, shows him indignant at an opinion, quoted to him by Sir Frederick Mappin, that he was getting into the hands of dealers and hurrying his work under pressure from them :

"Fortunately, or unfortunately, members of my profession who make any mark at all are the subject of much criticism and talk which is often presumptuous, wrong, or utterly foolish. None knew this better, I dare say, than John Phillip, your old friend. I have never desired the favour of critics and newspaper men, thinking, with Byron, that 'a man must serve his time to every trade save censure. Critics all are ready-made.' I have to look to members of my own profession for position and honour in it. It is therefore with me a matter of the highest importance that my pictures should be as good as I can make them, and thoroughly well studied. I should be unworthy indeed if money influenced me in the smallest degree as regards the *quality* of my work. . . . In conclusion, let me assure you that while I am by no means inclined to be self-confident in my own powers, yet I have judgment to see that being consciously true to my art I need not fear in the long run to receive my due from my profession and from the public as well."

Some critics—by no means all, for he had his meed of praise—have abused Pettie's work in his

lifetime and since ; the storied idea always their stumbling-block. But painters—and I have spoken with many whose own art is at the opposite pole to Pettie's in aim and method—are always enthusiastic in their homage to his colour and workmanship. I venture to think that no painter, however modern, and no critic, however biassed, could stand in front of that little portrait head in the Tate Gallery and honestly refrain from admiration and respect. Pettie need not fear to receive his due.

I have said little of the man himself. By his death in 1893 the world lost not only a fine painter, but one of the most honest, loyal, and generous of mankind. When writing Pettie's biography a year or two ago, I asked a well-known artist, who had been his life-long friend, for any recollection that would lend "atmosphere" to my memoir. He gave me several reminiscences, telling tale after tale of Pettie's cheeriness, loyalty, and unselfishness, and he ended: "Have you ever seen John Pettie's portrait of himself in the Aberdeen Gallery? It's all pure and luminous, all rich coral and amber and gold. That's the atmosphere you must suggest. Pettie was pure and honest through and through. His nature was all amber and gold."

MARTIN HARDIE.

































John
Pettie.

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NAME OF BORROWER

